



## Poetry for a Change

Poetry suggestions and readers' notes from National Poetry Day

## Introduction

We're delighted that your book group are planning to celebrate National Poetry Day.

Poetry can sometimes seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be. We're recommending 12 amazing books which are ideal for book groups. Some are single-author collections, some are selections of many decade's work. Some are anthologies which contain poems from a range of contemporary writers, others take a more historical view. The introductions below will give you an idea of what to expect so you can pick one or more that will suit your book group.

## In advance

Try to plan your meeting ahead of time as poetry might require a different format from other writing you discuss. If a whole book seems too much to digest then you can pick out a few poems to focus on instead. We recommend you start your session by taking it in turns to read a poem aloud to the group – depending on time perhaps each member could pick a favourite and say a little about why they like it. It may also be useful for a member of the group to research the poet or poets before you meet. We've come up with a few questions to initiate conversation if needed, but remember there is no wrong or right way to approach poetry, or to appreciate and discuss it. Just dive in and enjoy some poetry for National Poetry Day!

### **England: Poems from a School**

#### **Edited by Kate Clanchy**

This anthology brings together poems written by pupils at Oxford Spires Academy during Kate Clanchy's nine years as poet in residence there. The school attracts migrant communities and so has students from all over the world; over 30 languages are spoken and everyone is in a minority. These extraordinary poems by talented young people will move, shock and delight. As Clanchy writes, "The poems document migration, which is a central experience of our contemporary world, but they also remind us of the ancient purpose of poetry; to share, to explain, and to remember."

#### Questions:

- 1 How do these poems express ideas of home? Is home the place we are living in or the place we come from?
- 2 These poems are written by those for whom English is a second or even third or fourth language; how does the idea of an adopted tongue and a mother tongue inflect their work?
- 3 Did you read and write poetry at school? What do you think the benefits of Clanchy's approach are?

## **Rise Like Lions: Poetry for the Many**

**Compiled by Ben Okri**

In this anthology Booker Prize winner Ben Okri mobilises poetry with political force. Collecting poems from across centuries and continents, he celebrates poetry that moves us to action, that calls for change and meditates on truth. As Okri says, "We need poetry more than ever. We need its direct insistence on the magic of listening. In a world consumed by the madness of believing that only our side is right, we need the voices that speak to the highest in us".

### **Questions:**

- 1 These are all, in some way, political poems – poems of ideas and meditation, polemics, protests and plaintive lyrics. While some are direct rallying cries others are more oblique – do you find some approaches more persuasive or powerful than others?
- 2 Are there political opinions here you disagree with? Can you enjoy reading a poem which you disagree with? Should poetry be political? Can it avoid being political?
- 3 This anthology contains some poems that may well be familiar to you and which you may have even studied. If you re-encountered poems here has your approach to them or their impact on you changed since you last read them?

## **The Emergency Poet: An Anti-Stress Poetry Anthology**

**Edited by Deborah Alma**

In a hectic world can poetry help? Deborah Alma the world's first and only Emergency Poet believes so. This anthology is compiled from tried and tested cures she's come up with by travelling to schools, libraries, festivals and other events in her 1970's ambulance to offer consultations and prescriptions. Arranged by spiritual ailment, the sections include a range of verse, new and old, which may be of comfort to those in need of a pick-me-up for the soul.

### **Questions:**

- 1 In her introduction Deborah Alma says that these are poems which "offer empathy, guidance and relieve stress", that "follow a life through its challenges and hard times". What are the places/points in your life when you're most likely to appreciate an encounter with poetry? Are they all covered here?
- 2 Do you ever turn to poetry to help you in times of difficulty? If you didn't before has anything in this anthology encouraged you to do so?

- 3 If you were to choose one of these poems to have in your handbag or wallet, so it could be with you at all times, which would it be and why?

## Essex Clay

### **Andrew Motion**

*Essex Clay* is a biographical sequel to Motion's widely-acclaimed prose memoir *In the Blood*, but this time the former Poet Laureate looks back on his life in verse. With the narrative drive of a novel, this long poem rekindles, expands and gives a tragic resonance to subjects that have haunted the poet throughout his writing life. In the first part, he tells the story of his mother's riding accident, long unconsciousness and slow death; in the second, he remembers the end of his father's life; and in the third, he describes an encounter that deepens the poem's tangled themes of loss and memory and retrieval.

#### Questions:

- 1 This book uses elements of Motion's biography and real occurrences from his life as previously explored in a prose memoir. Why do you think he has chosen to use the medium of poetry to revisit these memories? How does poetry (form, structure, imagery for instance) help or perhaps hinder communication of these events? How does the changing layout of words on the page affect the reader?
- 2 This long poem explores personal subjects but uses the third person. Why do you think this is?
- 3 Why do you think this book is called *Essex Clay*? How do ideas of place and natural forces work in this poem?

## Visiting the Minotaur

### **Claire Williamson**

In Claire Williamson's inventive and intensely felt collection, the poet must enter a labyrinth of her own complicated family history, a history beset with secrets and lies, in order to come to terms with her own identity. She borrows from myths and history histories to fashion her artful meditations on experience and mortality. Of particular note are the poems inspired by the physical aspects of motherhood: labour, birth, breastfeeding, become another aspect of the author's theatre of pain, blood, and love.

#### Questions:

- 1 How does this collection use myths? How do these stories and legends operate with the more recent and contemporary content?
- 2 What different forms and rhyme schemes are used in the four parts of 'Temple Church, Temple Street, Bristol'? Why do you think the poet has employed these?

- 3 How many bovine creatures roam this collection? In what ways does the figure of the bull or cow operate?

### **The Forward Book of Poetry 2019**

“The Forward Prizes are invaluable in finding the most essential, exciting voices, highlighting the contemporary poets who are at the top of their game and whose words will travel far and reach many readers,” says Bidisha, chair of the judges for the 2018 Forward Prizes. This anthology, selected by the jury, brings together the best poetry published in the British Isles over the last year, including the winners of the 2018 Forward Prizes. In showcasing the range and ambition of today’s fresh voices alongside new work by familiar names, this anthology is a perfect introduction to contemporary poetry.

#### **Questions:**

- 1 On flicking through it for the first time, what caught your eye and why? What trends did you spot in either themes or forms?
- 2 If you had to choose just one poet’s collection to read in full on the basis of the samples which would you choose and why?
- 3 How international does UK poetry publishing seem to you based on this anthology? How diverse? Is it urban or rural or both?

### **A Watchful Astronomy**

#### **Paul Deaton**

This unusually clear and accessible work is haunted by the ghost of the author’s father, a figure that appears throughout the collection as an overbearing, even threatening presence, embodied in glowering mountain ranges, in icy blasts of weather, in bits of bleak, monosyllabic dialogue. These are realist and formalist poems, preferring simple, accurate language and use of formal meter with a powerful underlying current of emotion.

#### **Questions:**

- 1 This book is split into two parts. Why do you think that is? What distinguishes each half of the book?
- 2 Deaton’s poetry plays a lot with form and metre. How does this affect your experience of reading the poems?
- 3 This is poetry that delights in using metaphor. Do you think using metaphor to convey experiences is more or less powerful than being more directly descriptive?

## **Luck is the Hook**

**Imtiaz Dharker**

The sixth collection from the winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, explores themes drawn from a life of transitions: childhood, exile, journeying, home, displacement, religious strife and terror, and latterly, grief. In these poems chance plays a part in finding or losing people and places that are loved: a change in the weather, a trick of language, a bomb that misses its mark, six pomegranate seeds eaten by mistake; all these events cast long shadows and raise questions about who is recording them, about believing, not believing, wanting to believe. The book is also illustrated with Dharker's own drawings.

### **Questions:**

- 1 As well as 'standard' English there are a lot of dialect and non-English words and phrases used in this collection. You might not be familiar with or understand these. Why do you think Dharker chooses to do this?
- 2 The poems in this book are interspersed with illustrations by the poet. What impact does this have on your reading? How do the images and words interact?
- 3 How does the mythical interact with the (seemingly) real in and between these poems? What images and places are repeated throughout the collection?

## **Gold from the Stone**

**Lemn Sissay**

This selection contains new work and old favourites from one of Britain's most exciting poets. Sissay was seventeen when he wrote his first poetry book, which he hand-sold to the miners and millworkers of Wigan. Since then his poems have become landmarks, sculpted in granite and built from concrete, recorded on era-defining albums and declaimed in over thirty countries. He has performed to thousands of football fans at the FA Cup Final, to hundreds of thousands as the poet of the London Olympics, and to millions across our TV screens and the airwaves of BBC Radio. He has become one of the nation's best-loved voices.

### **Questions:**

- 1 The poems in this selection cover a career of more than 30 years, from 1985 to 2016. What changes and continuations did you notice in Sissay's work over this time? Do these reflect wider changes and continuations in literature and society as a whole?

- 2 In his introduction Sissay talks about anger: "...I found myself in a situation where my own anger could be commodified in the arts and, instinctively, I knew my anger ran too deep to be accommodated or paid for. There was a deeper level to anger, I believed. One that couldn't be sold or bought." In what ways, and to what end, do these poems harness anger and other feelings such as joy, fear and compassion?
- 3 How is language used in these poems? There are made-up words, colloquialisms, abusive language and slurs: why do you think they are used?

### **Undying: A Love Story**

#### **Michel Faber**

This heartfelt and heart-breaking collection is addressed to the Faber's late wife. This is a chronicle of a life spent together, a six-year battle with cancer, death and living on after. Bright, tragic and candid, these poems explore what it means to find the love of your life and what it is like to have to say goodbye.

#### **Questions:**

- 1 These poems form a very personal narrative of loss and grief. Faber says in his introduction that "I hadn't known such need for poetry before." Why do you think poetry is such a powerful force in times of heartache? Do you turn to poetry to help with grief?
- 2 Many people will have lost someone close to them from cancer. Did reading this book evoke experiences of your own? Did you find the details familiar or different? This collection tends not to prettify, looking directly at the ugly realities of sickness. Did you find this a painful or a cathartic reading experience?
- 3 The collection is arranged chronologically. What changes across the course of these poems? And what remains the same?

### **Ricantations**

#### **Loretta Collins Klobah**

New World English and Spanish rub shoulders in these poems, but the reader soon picks up the precise, word-loving, observant rhythms of the poet's own voice, a voice which has space for humour. Collins Klobah is a superb poetic story-teller with a compassionate and radical womanist vision, alert to the multi-layered reality of Puerto Rican life. In these fantastic (often literally) poems she reflects on contemporary life, history, art, medicine, violence and her own experience.

#### **Questions:**

- 1 The title of this selection of Collins Klobah's poetry is a made-up word, possibly recalling 'incantations' or 'recantations', or playing on the 'Rico' or Puerto Rico. How does it describe the book and the poet's style, themes and approaches?
- 2 Many of these poems employ partially fantastical narratives. Pick one such poem and discuss it first as a story: what is happening? Where is this taking place? Who is narrating? Bearing this in mind, how does its poetic form and language affect the telling of the story?
- 3 These poems use Spanish and New World English as well as 'standard' English. How does this add to the musicality of the poems? If you don't know Spanish did you prefer to look up the translations as you read or after you had finished reading the poem?

### **Unwritten: Caribbean Poems After the First World War**

**Edited by Karen McCarthy Woolf**

Poetry from and about the First World War is well-known and widely-studied in the UK, greatly contributing to our understanding of the conflict. Yet the accounts of the volunteers who served in the British West Indies Regiment's 11 battalions remain largely untold in poetry, though their stories reflect a turbulent world in which they faced injustice, prejudice and indifference from the very country for which they had signed up to fight. For this anthology, co-commissioned by 14-18 NOW, BBC Contains Strong Language and the British Council, editor Karen McCarthy Woolf invited contemporary poets of the diaspora to respond to the Caribbean experience of the First World War.

#### **Questions:**

- 1 Was the involvement of Caribbean soldiers in the First World War something you were aware of before reading this volume? What did you learn about their involvement and experiences?
- 2 How do these contemporary explorations of conflict compare to what you already know of the pre-existing literature of the conflict?
- 3 Why do you think war so often prompts poetry? What do you think poetry can tell us about the experience of conflict? Are there things it can't express or convey?

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